DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 235 CS 012 385

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TITLE The Importance of Storybook Reading to Emergent Literacy: A Review of the Research.
PUB DATE 6 Dec 95
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; *Emergent Literacy; *Family Environment; Literature Reviews; *Parent Participation; Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Reading Aloud to Others; *Reading Research; *Story Reading; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Family Literacy

ABSTRACT

Educators have known for years that children who come from homes where storybooks are read have an advantage over those children who are not read to. Research has shown that shared reading, reading aloud, making a variety of print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy have a significant impact on children's literacy learning. During storybook reading, parents also enhance their children's learning by encouraging the development of several skills which they are usually unaware are so important to their child's development. Research has also shown that children who learn to read early are those who have been read to. If teachers look for and respond to the positives of family life, they can encourage families to continue with the important task of building their children's language. Teachers also need to learn more about how parents and children share literacy on a daily basis and explore how such events can serve school learning. Teachers often fail to realize the importance of story book reading. Stories should be a part of the everyday routine, especially in the primary grades. Finally, teachers should develop a home-school connection that encourages and communicates the importance of reading to children at home. (Contains six references.) (RS)

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The Importance of Storybook Reading to Emergent Literacy:

A Review of the Research

by

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December 6, 1995

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There has been a great deal of research done on the importance of storybook reading to the development of early language and literacy. I plan to review some of the research, and give suggestions as to how we as teachers can integrate this information into our planning and philosophy.

Educators have known for years that children who come from homes where storybooks are read have an advantage over those children who are not read to (Strickland, 27). This is evident to teachers, but many have not looked closely at this, and determined how they would change what they are doing in their classrooms to build on it.

Lesley Morrow believes that, "Such practices in the homw as shared reading, reading aloud, making a variety of print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy have been found to have a significant impact on children's literacy learning" (Morrow, 194). This is a very strong statement of encouragement for parents to read to their children, and to provide meaningful language experience for them.

In homes where family storybook reading is done, Strickland believes that there are also several other conditions present. They consist of an atmosphere of success, child-centeredness, a meaningful context for language development, the presentation of the entire language system, and several different methods of presentation (Strickland, 28). All of these conditions add to the language development of the child. "Homes where books were out and readily available, where paper, pens, pencils, crayons, magic markers, and other instruments were handy, where children seemed

quite naturally to be included and involved, seemed to provide the key conditions for children to go exploring and for parents to involve themselves in reading and writing, whether they 'technically' reported that they knew what they were doing or not." (Harste, 42-43). Homes with this type of environment can't help but be rich in literacy, even if the parents are unaware of it.

Families also use books and literature as a method of communicating family values(Strickland, 31). There has been a push in schools to rebuild the family values that seem to be falling apart in our society. What better way to do so than by using stories to show both positive and negative forms of behavior. Children can listen and respond to the stories and relate them to personal experience.

During storybook reading, parents also enhance their childrens learning by encouraging the development of several skills which they are usually unaware are so important to their child's development. According to Strickland, "parents frequently help their children understand a new word or concept by relating it to something the child already knows" (Strickland, 29). They also "expand and extend the context in natural and meaningful ways" (Strickland, 30). By talking about the words and the pictures, or relating them to a family trip or activity, the child's background knowledge is being developed and enhanced (Strickland, 30). These activities and experiences are also very personal and child-centered, thus giving them much more meaning to the child (Strickland, 30). Parents also help the child move to higher levels of thinking during family reading. Wolf states that, "as

children progress in age and understanding, some mothers 'up the ante', requiring their children to be more accurate in their responses" (Wolf, 391). This is a lesson that teachers should learn and use in the classroom. If we recreate the safe environment that parents create, we too can encourage this type of response.

Many people believe that it takes a great deal of effort on the part of the parents to create a rich language environment, but in actuality literacy occurs as family members go about their daily lives (Morrow, 194). Harste, et. al., refer to immersing the child in language in the daily activities as a type of inclusion. Children who are "dragged" to the doctor, Post Office, shopping, etc., have been shown to have an advantage over those who are left at home (Harste, 44).

Children who learn to read early are those who have been read to (Strickland, 35). She also states that, "When parents read stories to children at home, their children's later language and reading achievement are positively influenced" (Strickland, 52). Wolf states that, "those who are read to at an early age and who are given opportunities for discussion, critically analyze stories quite early" (394). Since these statements have been scientifically studied and proven, how can we as teachers respond?

First of all, we must stop looking at all of the faults we feel that families have and concentrate on the positive. Lesley Morrow states that "families are too often viewed in deficits and dilemmas" (197). This is often the case. The school doesn't seem to give notice of all of the positive things that families do, but

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is very quick to notice and judge the deficits. If we look for and respond to the positives, we will encourage families to continue with the important task of building their children's language.

Secondly, "teachers need to learn more about how parents and children share literacy on a daily basis and explore how such events can serve school learning"(Morrow, 197-198). If we as teachers look at how we interact with our own children while reading to them, we may learn some very important lessons. We should also talk to parents and be willing to use some of their ideas and techniques on our classroom, rather than following a rigid set of rules that in reality have probably been created by ourselves.

"Teachers often fail to realize the importance of story book reading"(Strickland, 31). I have been in several classrooms where teachers haven't read to the children because of the lack of time. They feel that it is more important to finish the paper and pencil work, and in doing so, are depriving the children of the important language and literacy experiences that storybook reading provides.

"Listening to and responding to books is viewed as a vital resource for building background knowledge, fostering language development, linking reading to writing, developing a sense of story, and building positive attitudes about books and print" (Strickland, 34). The number of language lessons that the parents provide by simply reading a story are incredible, and yet we as teachers fail to do the same. Children already have a background of listening to nd responding to books before they come to us. We need to concentrate on improving and building on what they already

have.

We can also learn lessons from the type of environments that the families create in their homes. We need to have childcentered classrooms that create a sense of safety in taking the risks that are needed when developing literacy. Materials should be available for the children to use and explore. Teachers need to be less concerned about whether or not the children are making a mess, or if they get crayon on the table. By providing a rich literacy environment, we will make a large impact on our children's futures.

Stories should be a part of the everyday routine, especially in the primary grades when the children are developing their language skills. It could make a very large difference in their future language and literacy accomplishments.

Finally, since the importance of reading to children at home is so significant, we should be working very hard to have a home-school connection which encourages and communicates this importance. If parents and teachers work together to build the child's language development, just think of the impact we could have on the literacy development of the child.

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